DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 402 586 CS 215 595

AUTHOR Dutcher, Violet A.
TITLE Textual Authority: The Rhetorical Politics of Thomas Nashe.
PUB DATE Mar 96
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (47th, Milwaukee, WI, March 27-30, 1996).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Amish; Higher Education; *Intellectual History; Literary Devices; *Religious Conflict; *Rhetoric
IDENTIFIERS *Anabaptists; Educational Issues; Historical Background; Mennonites; *Nashe (Thomas); Religious Movements; Voice (Rhetoric)

ABSTRACT

Through the voice of Thomas Nashe in "The Unfortunate Traveller," published in 1594, it is possible to see another side of the historical conflict between splintering Anabaptist groups and the state-operated church which controlled voice and thus literacy and literature during the Renaissance. The Anabaptist movement, forerunner of the Amish and Mennonites, did not originate solely out of theological discussion, but also out of the need for a new socioeconomic order. Ethnic roots and academic interests, particularly in literacy, came together in the question of how the surrounding society and its literature muzzled and silenced groups. In Nashe's era, it was impossible for a person to belong to an Anabaptist group and to be a member of the state church, with all the loyalties this membership endows. In this conflict of roles, or in ways of thinking, today it may be necessary to choose sides. Nashe uses metaphors to name the perpetual conflicts and how knowledge is constructed. Is there an ethical conflict between the role of Anabaptist, and other marginalized groups, and the role of loyal citizen/student of writing and literature? It is concluded that an individual can be both an Anabaptist and a composition student of writing with seeming ease. In the student role, research to understand writing, literature, and history can be undertaken, and, in the Anabaptist role, freedom of individual thought to express ideas and to interrogate literature can be exercised. (CR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 402 586

Violet A. Dutcher

Textual Authority: The Rhetorical Politics of Thomas Nashe

Recently I saw another side of the historical conflict between splintering Anabaptist groups and the state-operated church who controlled voice and thus controlled literacy and literature during the Renaissance. This understanding came through the voice of Thomas Nashe in *The Vnfortvnate Traveller* published in 1594. The Anabaptist sect that began in the Renaissance era was the forerunner of my Amish and Mennonite culture. My ethnic roots and academic interests, particularly in literacy, came together when I began to ask how the surrounding society and its literature muzzles and silences groups. How does language do what it does, and how is knowledge constructed through discourse? I assumed previously that the conflict was fairly clear cut: A small group of dissenters, the Anabaptists, was persecuted wrongly by a powerful state religion. In my Mennonite culture, I am informed by theologians romancing the past that these dissenters are heroes and martyrs. Yet they are role models pointing the way for dealing with conflict in the real world--to the death. But Nashe exposes another side: A side that is yet one more "wonderfull spectacle of blood-shed" as he writes it (231). These Anabaptists threatened local governments, dabbled into canonized theology, and ultimately, threatened bodily harm to the monarchy. I get the feeling that I could not be a Renaissance Anabaptist and a literate citizen producing literature at the same time. The latter role--producing literature--seems to assume a loyalty to the monarchy, and Anabaptists were dissenters. I am an Anabaptist and a student of language and literature, canonized or otherwise; and there are troubling times when one of these two roles fights for my loyalty at the expense of the other. I sense the clash between these two identities more pronounced at some times than at others, and these roles are in conflict during my experience with Nashe.

CS215585

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

V. Dutcher

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

I'm talking here about two ways of thinking, not membership to a particular group. I realize that in Nashe's era, it's impossible for someone to belong to an Anabaptist group and to be a member of the state-operated church with all the loyalties this membership endows, including that of literature. As I carefully consider the possible mapping of these roles, I sense two journeys, in opposite directions, pulling at the same time.

In this conflict of roles, or in ways of thinking, I feel the strongest impulse to fight for the role of the Anabaptist against the role of upholding a literature canon and subsequently the current national monarchy. However, I celebrate national literature also. If we, who love language and the literature it produces, do not do the celebrating, no one else will. Throughout this discussion, I will remain open to both impulses. Perhaps it is possible to fully support both. Perhaps the conflict is in the feeling of conflict, and I actually support both roles quite well. In other words, perhaps the roles need not be seen in such oppositional terms. But, in reading Nashe like an Anabaptists, I feel forced to choose a role, to choose sides.

Before any clear discussion of role conflict or Nashe's treatment of Anabaptists can occur, I think it necessary that historical background inform. During the Renaissance, the Anabaptist movement produced dissonance across Europe. This movement did not originate solely out of theological discussion, but also began out of the need for a new socio-economic order (Clasen, ASH, xi).. The movement expanded rapidly, dependent upon the ambition and dedication of individual leaders and not highly organized teamwork (Clasen, ASH, 18). This movement occurred predominately in Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands, and it included peasantry, craftsmen, artisans, and those from intellectual circles.

Let me now discuss point by point the conflicts perceived by Nashe--conflicts between a specific group of anabaptists residing in Münster, Germany, and citizens loyal to the monarchy. Because of my love of metaphor and my fascination with how metaphors are used by writers to persuade an audience, I examined Nashe's discourse of Anabaptists for metaphor usage. I discovered several clusters that name these perceptual conflicts and that name how knowledge is constructed; in other words, one way to discuss how language does what it does. Metaphor usage is a rhetorical act, and its focus, according to Sonja Foss, "is on symbols that are deliberately formulated by a rhetor to accomplish a particular purpose" (5). From the distance of 400 years, it is possible to imagine Nashe's audience sharing this focus of attitude as they are oriented into a collective unit that sets them apart as a group with a unity of purpose. This group or Nashe's audience is perceived then, by contemporary readers, as representing those loyal to canonized literature and the monarchy, and they stand in direct opposition to the Anabaptists.

I will discuss three sets of metaphors, along with additional information that will assist in your knowledge of what Anabaptism and this conflict is all about.

Nashe uses ten pages in his novel to recount a specific clash--actually an armed conflict resulting in all out war--between a group of Anabaptists from Münster, Germany, called Münsterites, and town authorities. Scholars agree that the participants in the event recorded by Nashe, which took place sixty years prior to the publication of his novel, were fanatical revolutionaries taking part in a fiasco and an infamous period of terror, and they were far from being typical Anabaptists. Anabaptist leaders everywhere denounced their behavior, and they did not want to be associated with these Münsterites.

One of the conflicting doctrinal disputes that Nashe tackles involves baptism. While the state church required infants to be baptized at birth, Anabaptists refused on the grounds that infants are incapable of experiencing the regeneration that is inherent in baptism. Because this experience is difficult when linked to infants, Anabaptists felt that baptism should be a part of adult experience. They carried out this practice illegally and were arrested, imprisoned, and killed for this and other beliefs and behaviors. Thus, Wilton, Nashe's capricious main character in *The Vnfortvnate Traveller* says, "[A]ccording to their Anabaptisticall error, they might al be new christened in their owne blood" (232). The Anabaptists' conditions are met; they are consenting adults and capable of regeneration. In other words, because the Anabaptists chose this manner of dying by insisting on religious freedom of choice in baptism, then let them be baptized as a group in this war--except that the liquid used is not water but blood. Through this metaphor, Nashe's audience visualizes the bloody spectacle as an illegal baptism turned legal by authorities, and the Anabaptists experience the end results of their theological error. This bloody baptism metaphor works as a camouflage for the audience and prevents them from the emphathetic questioning of their own fears and discomfort regarding the implied freedom.

This image turns more serious as Wilton begins to instruct his audience regarding the finer points of the conflict. "Verie deuout Asses they were . . ." (233). This seemingly oxymoronic metaphor reveals the perception held in regard to the Anabaptists. The connotative meaning of Ass referring to a stupid and/or obstinate person linked to deuout, which is a devotion or fervor for religion, provide the complete picture of Anabaptists: They are a stupid people who show wholehearted, perverted passion for a religion that reflects the vulgarity of their thinking. In fact, Wilton asserts, "[They] though they knew as much of Gods mind as richer men" (233).

The assertion exposes the collision of Anabaptists and the surrounding society. And this collision points to the reason why the roles of an Anabaptist and a lover of literature cannot occupy the same person. Wilton asserts that "inspiration . . . buzd in their eares like a Bee in a boxe euerie hower what newes from heaven, hell, and the land of whipperginnie" (233). Although Nashe, through Wilton, plays with descriptive language expertly here and deflates their "inspiration" as no more enlightening than a buzzing bee, the accusation is based on very real concerns. What motivated these people to think they could know God's mind, be inspired by him, and act upon his words? For this, they were, indeed, slaughtered.

Nashe infuses his audience with empathy toward authority as he calls for their observation of the Münster experience. As the character, Wilton, continues with his narrative of the Anabaptists' demise that parades the spectacle of insecure defenders of the status quo taking back what was stolen by Anabaptists, the close-gathering crowd surprisingly exchanges its spectator gaze for contemplative regard. He writes:

> Pittifull and lamentable was their vnpittied and well perfourmed slaughter. To see euen a Beare (which is the most cruellest of all beasts) too-too bloudily over-matcht and deformedly rent in peeces by an vnconsciounable number of curres, it would mooue compassion against kinde . . . to recall their hard-harted wishes, and moane him suffering as a milde beast, in comparison of the fowel-mouthed Mastiues, his butchers. (240)

Wilton, after declaring the Münster debacle a "well deserued confusion," suddenly turns the mood of his audience to empathy (240). The use of this particular bear metaphor in the midst of the narrative sets the Anabaptists apart in the spectacle of sport. Set free, the bear is wild and cruel

and feared. But "beholding him at the stake," the bear is domesticated or tamed (240). Thus, fear is conquered and controlled.

Behind this presentation, then, I'm really asking a larger cultural question: Is there an ethical conflict between the role of Anabaptist, and other marginalized groups, and the role of loyal citizen/student of writing and literature? Perhaps my roles are over-simplified, but if ethics is the essence of action, then there is space for ethics not only in real life roles but also in written portrayals of spectacles. Unfortunately, Nashe, like his contemporaries, painted all Anabaptists with the same brush as those involved in Münster. Thus, the account transcends a single event and becomes the narrative of all Anabaptists.

Throughout the Renaissance, this narrative prevailed as the dominating text. The powerful muzzle fitted so securely that Anabaptists are still remembered for their uncouth, rabble-rousing customs rather than as an authentic movement struggling for freedom from religious repression.

We are not sure this Wilton, a comic villain, styled by Nashe, gives us an honest rendering of events. However, Wayne Booth aptly states, "Yet regardless of how much we may reason about it, we have, in the course of our reading of this book, been caught. Caught in the trap of a suffering consciousness, we are led to succumb morally as well as visually" (383). We are committed, and this commitment is required by the author (Booth, 144).

And, what of me--the me that is taking two journeys in opposite directions demanding my attention? When I was two years old, I spent a lot of time playing outside in the yard. I was terrified when two neighborhood, teen-aged girls donned blackface masks and peered out their windows at me. With thoughts only for the warm safety of my home, I darted swiftly for the

porch steps only to experience the harsh jerking of the leather harness strapped around my chest. I was able to run to safety as far as the linked chain fastened to the harness on me and the clothesline allowed me. Against the resistance of the leather straps, I bawled for help, determined to be rescued.

This scene is one of my earliest memories of childhood. Although my mother's intentions were to protect me from the large trucks on their way to the nearby coal mine while I played outside, I still feel claustrophobic at attempts to rein me in. And so, I admire these Anabaptists who attempted to name their world and to shape their lives. They were determined to rescue themselves from their restraints. The realization of their marginalization and the spectacle of their caging fires a fierce empathy within me. And I shall name my world as well. I live in an age where I can be an Anabaptist and a composition student of writing with seeming ease. Perhaps the conflict has played itself out. Or, perhaps the conflict has gone internal only to rise to the surface when face to face with a spectacle that stirs ancient memories. My fight for an authentic Anabaptist role declares an ethical stance revealed in the act of writing this defense and declares a proposition to re-construct--to re-create. In my student role, I research for this presentation in order to understand writing, literature, and history, and in my Anabaptist role, I exercise my freedom of individual thought to express ideas and to interrogate literature.

Works Cited

Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 1961.

Clasen, Claus-Peter. *Anabaptism: A Social History, 1525-1618*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1972.

Foss, Sonja K. *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland P, 1989.

McKerrow, Ronald B., ed. *The Works of Thomas Nashe*. Vol II. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958.